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ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview of primary education in Belgium. Part I delineates: (1) official objectives; (2) primary school organization; (3) liaison between primary school and infant school; (4) number of pupils and teachers; (5) grouping of pupils; (6) the school timetable; (7) subjects taught; (8) pupil assessment methods; (9) aspects of initial and in-service teacher training courses; (10) school support services; and (11) institutional links between school, family, and community. Part II, which concerns problems and trends, briefly describes school reform initiatives. Part III provides references to published reports concerning the Flemish-speaking and French systems. (RH)

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Project No. 8:
"Innovation in primary education"

Primary education in Belgium

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COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Project No. 8 - Innovation in primary education

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BELGIUM

Report submitted by

the Belgian authorities

PART I

1. Official objectives

The Act of 29 June 1983 extended the compulsory education period to the age of 18. So primary schooling, which used to be self-contained and was the only education received by the majority of pupils, has started to focus on preparing pupils for secondary education.

Primary education aims at the harmonious development of all pupils and is preceded in 90% of cases by optional kindergarten attendance. Various types of support exist to ensure that children from different walks of life have equal chances and a social life suited to each age. In addition to the most functional teaching possible in basic techniques, primary school provides manual and aesthetic education.

2. Primary school organisation

Since Article 17 of the Belgian Constitution stipulates that «education shall be free», primary schools are organised by various authorities: the state, the provinces, the municipalities, and private institutions. Among the latter, Catholic schools are by far the most important. The state takes full financial responsibility for its own schools, whereas the other organising authorities, official or private, may be subsidised in conditions laid down by the law.

Parents are free to choose whatever school they wish, whether it be a state or a subsidised private school. The composition of these systems varies according to the language area.

1. French and German-speaking sector:

Official education	- state	20.03%	
	- provincial	4.04%	57.04%
	- municipal	32.07%	
Private education			42.06%
TOTAL			100.00%

2. Flemish-speaking sector:

Official education	- state	17.82%	
	- provincial	1.53%	32.50%
	- municipal	13.15%	
Private education			67.50%
TOTAL			100.00%

Schooling is free in all primary schools and teachers' salaries are paid by the state, while the organising authorities receive an annual working grant of some 6,750 BF per pupil. Schools attached to the various organising authorities have virtually the same curriculum in the compulsory subjects, for which no minimum timetable is laid down.

Each organising authority enjoys freedom in its programming and methods. The state issues a curriculum for its schools, as do the large cities and the Catholic Education Federation. State inspectors visit the subsidised schools, as a guarantee of the standard of teaching and source of advice to teachers and school authorities.

3. Liaison between primary school and infant school

Two-and-a-half to six-year-old children are admitted to the kindergartens attached to primary schools which are under the authority of the Ministry of Education. In the last few years it has been sought to improve the integration of these two levels: play methods have been extended to primary education, teachers take part in the process and there is a greater wealth of teaching material. The «Project VLO» (VLO - reformed primary education) in Flanders and the "Cycle 5-8" in Wallonia are experiments in bringing the two levels of basic education closer together.

When a primary school is attached to a public or private secondary school, the transition to secondary education is easy. Moreover, as the choice has been delayed by the introduction of the first two observation classes, adjustment is facilitated.

Children who have failed to obtain a primary school certificate are admitted at the age of 12 to class B, known as the «reception class».

4. Number of pupils and teachers

1. In the Flemish-speaking region:

Year	No. of pupils	No. of schools	No. of classes	No. of teachers
1977-78	499,345	2,575	22,858	27,349
1981-82	443,386	2,323	21,569	26,744
1986-87	429,022	2,470	--	25,839

2. French and German-speaking region:

1977-78	379.169	2,553	17,419	19,135
1981-82	358,385	2,295	17,219	18,846

It will be seen that in Flanders the average number of pupils per teacher fell from 18.25% in 1977-78 to 16.57% in 1981-82, and in Wallonia from 19.81% to 19.01%. Remedial teachers and principals relieved of class responsibilities are not included in these ratios.

5. The grouping of pupils

Over the six years of primary schooling, the course is divided as follows:

- level one, two years, for six to eight year olds;

- level two, two years, for eight to 10 year olds;

- level three, two years, for 10 to 12 year olds.

Three quarters of the children attend schools with more than three qualified teachers. They are divided into age groups and most classes cover only one year of schooling. However, mixed age groups do exist for pedagogical reasons, and are even formed at times for certain school activities in the basic subjects.

6. School timetable

Primary education involves a minimum of 28 hours of lessons per week. The school year comprises 182 school days, each week consisting of nine half-days. It begins on 1 September and ends on 30 June.

7. Subjects taught

The compulsory subjects are laid down in Section 50 of the relevant Act. They are: reading in the language of the region, writing, simple arithmetic, the legal units of measurement, elementary French, Dutch or German according to local needs, the geography and history of Belgium. Only in schools in the Brussels conurbation and a few schools along the language frontier is a second language a compulsory subject (three hours per week in the third and fourth primary years and five hours per week in the fifth and sixth primary years). Subsidised organising authorities may add subjects to the curriculum or appoint special teachers at their own expense (eg for music, drawing or handwork).

Public schools must also offer a free choice between a course of secular moral education and one of four courses of religious education (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Islamic), each involving two or three hours of tuition per week.

8. Pupil assessment methods

The directives and advice issued show that assessment is designed to promote the continuous progress of each child. In the «VLO» schools and the «Cycles 5-8», the accent is on pupil observation and individual records are recommended. However, oral and written tests and examinations are a feature of the majority in schools. The totting up of marks is not recommended, but this practice is still frequent in school reports, which have not been standardised.

In pursuance of the royal decree of 15 June 1984, schools award a primary education certificate to pupils who have successfully completed their primary schooling by passing their sixth-year examination, which is the same for all schools in most towns.

In pursuance of the royal decree of 15 June 1984, the same certificate may be obtained by pupils who pass the cantonal examination. Catholic schools hold one similar test in each language area.

9. Initial and in-service teacher training courses

Two-year courses for holders of the upper secondary education certificate are provided in the official (municipal or state) primary teacher training colleges or equivalent subsidised private institutions. These courses cover thoroughly the branches of primary education, as well as child psychology, educational method and the history of education.

They include some 16 weeks of practical training in primary school classes.

For in-service staff two days of training per annum, known as pedagogical lecture days, are organised by the ministry's inspectorate, or by pedagogical advisers appointed by the subsidised private education authorities. Since 1978-79 Flemish teachers may take half a day off per fortnight for retraining without any cancellation of lessons for their pupils. Higher schools of education organise two and three-year courses which are attended by some 10% of teachers. The same applies to the seminar held by the ministry in the Easter holidays under the name of «Pedagogical week».

10. School support services

Every school must be attached to a school medical inspection centre and may also be attached to a psycho-medico-social centre of CPMS (350 throughout the country), while the state schools combine both services.

At the mental health and rehabilitation centres depending on the Ministry of Public Health or the Ministry of Social Affairs school children in psycho-social care are treated, partly during school hours, by speech therapists, kinesitherapists and social welfare workers.

11. Institutional links between school, family and community

The two parents' associations (for public and private schools) are represented on the two reform commissions set up by the ministers. Parents are free to form their own groups and, at any rate in state schools, to take part in school management. Some schools associate parents closely with educational support activities such as remedial courses, group work, workshops, handwork, class excursions etc. In the early primary school classes, a third of the schools organise open days. Before a school can try out a pedagogical experiment such as the «Cycle 5-8» or the «VLO», the consent of both parents and teachers is required.

PART II

PROBLEMS AND TRENDS

Reform movements

In Wallonia since 1971 and in Flanders since 1973, the three school systems have launched a concerted series of experiments for the reform of basic schooling, including:

1. The «VLO» scheme, which this year covers 274 Flemish schools, and whose four features are:

- concern for the continuity of schooling for the three to six year olds and six to 12 years olds, in order to achieve a consistent education for all;

- differentiation measures at the two levels of schooling, tutoring and remedial teaching in cases of difficulty;

- family-school co-operation;

- activities to promote creative expression and harmonious development.

2. A pedagogical scheme known as the «Cycle 5-8» combines in a large group the third year kindergarten children (five year olds) with the children in the first two primary classes (six to eight year olds), under a team of three teachers (one kindergarten and two primary school teachers), who are responsible for the continuous progress of 45 to 59 children over a period of three years.

This experiment, now operative in 67 French-speaking schools, is based on the following principles:

- offering the best chances of development to a maximum number of children;

- preventing too many cases of repeated years;

- smoothing the transition from kindergarten to primary school;

- responding to the child's interests by helping him to understand his natural, social and technical environment;

- abolishing premature cognitive learning in the third year of kindergarten and avoiding excessive too much intellectual emphasis at the first level of primary education.

PART III

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Flemish-speaking system

Evaluation of the «PROJECT-VLO» has given rise to two publications on a number of aspects:

1. Four reports commissioned by the ministry and the COB (commission for the reform of basic education) and produced by MM DE BLOCK and MARTENS of the University of Ghent and by MM VANDENBERGHE and JANSSENS of the University of Louvain.

2. A synthesis of these reports published by the Ministry of Education (Flemish-speaking sector) under the title «Informatieblad», special issue, October 1981, ref. D/1981/2771/2, Brussels.

French system

Several reports have been produced since 1976-77 by the inspectorate, animateurs, parent associations and the federations of the organising authorities on the launching of the «Cycle 5-8» scheme and its results from the points of view of the teaching team and the pupils' achievement. The following may be mentioned as of particular interest:

1. PIRON and PIRLET, «Rapport sur la mise en place du «Cycle 5-8», February 1980, 220 pp., University of Liège and Ministry of Education.

2. «Animation et inspection - rapport sur l'évaluation des élèves et des équipes», June 1981, 80 pp., Ministry of Education, Brussels.

3. BLONDIN and MASSOZ, «Recherches sur les compétences minimales à atteindre en fin de cycle 5-8», June 1981, 400 pp., University of Liège.

4. CREF, «Le cycle 5-8. Où en est-on?», October 1981, 40 pp., Ministry of Education, Arcades, Brussels.